



# Late tracking and reduced school selection eliminate school inequalities

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Finland is often hailed as the model of educational equality, where students attend similar comprehensive schools and social background effects are small. Yet even in this egalitarian system, differences between schools persist.

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LONGITUDINAL EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS: REDUCING INEQUALITIES



School differences are often attributed to the socioeconomic characteristics of their student intake (Coleman, 1966). In education systems with early tracking, such as Germany's and the Netherlands', or those that allow considerable scope for "school shopping", such as Ireland's, students of similar socioeconomic background are often grouped together in schools. In contrast, countries that delay tracking and limit active school selection, such as Finland, have lower levels of between school differences in student composition. Since students attend similar comprehensive schools with little differentiation, differences in educational outcomes of students can often be assumed to purely reflect individual students' attributes. Yet research from Finland shows that even in highly egalitarian systems, schools can shape educational outcomes beyond individual background.

Finland's reputation for educational equity and excellence stems from reforms in the 1970s that replaced an early tracking education system with a single comprehensive model up to age 16. These reforms were associated with a reduction in socioeconomic educational inequalities, with Finland's subsequent high-performance in PISA assessments across social groups reinforcing its reputation for equalising educational opportunities. Yet recent increases in socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes (OECD, 2023) have raised concerns as to whether schools can effectively mitigate against inequalities.

In line with other Nordic countries, Finland's school enrolment is largely premised on geographic zoning, which has been credited with reducing the effect of family influence on school selection (Pöder et al., 2017). Despite this, while the majority of Finland's schools have largely socioeconomically heterogeneous intakes, a minority are disproportionately socioeconomically advantaged or disadvantaged. LEARN research has shown that in these schools educational outcomes differ substantially, even after accounting for individual students' individual characteristics.

Given the zoning intake policies of the Finnish education system, such differences likely reflect the neighbourhoods they serve. Neighbourhood effects in educational outcomes are largely mediated through school composition (Kauppinen, 2008), with the resultant risk that school composition will become increasingly stratified as spatial segregation increases in Finnish cities (Bernelius & Vilkkama, 2019). While overall levels of inequality remain low and the proportion of school with highly advantaged/disadvantaged school intakes has remained largely stable, analysis from the LEARN project indicates that there is a moderate trend towards increasing school composition effects on student education trajectories.

Even in a largely undifferentiated and egalitarian education systems like Finland's, ascertaining where student characteristics end and school composition effects start is complex. School composition effects could potentially reflect differences in learning environments, the role of peer influences, or be correlated with other factors such as school resources. Despite uncertainty as to the mechanisms, Finland still offers generalisable lessons in that, even in a highly equitable and undifferentiated education system, schools matter, and changing social and neighbourhood dynamics can moderate their effect. In a context of shifting demographic and migration patterns, such considerations take on increased significance.

#### NOTE

*Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.*

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